

## Colorado State Technical Committee

Holiday Inn - Denver West - Golden, Colorado

October 8, 2008

Welcome: **Allen Green**, State Conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), welcomed everyone and introductions were made. Allen reviewed the agenda and commented on this opportunity to meet at the start of a new farm bill, recognizing the great responsibility to future of the programs. Cindy Lair, from the Colorado State Conservation Board, commented on the importance of grassland conservation and voiced concerns regarding the extent of acreage in expiring CRP contracts.

### 2002 Farm Bill Activities Summary

#### Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 – **Tim Carney**

Tim presented a summary of 2002 Farm Bill accomplishments and Resource Concerns.

<b>NRCS Farm Bill Programs 2002-2008 COLORADO Accomplishments by Program</b>			
<b>Program</b>	<b>Contracts Approved</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Total Funding</b>
Environmental Quality Incentives Program – <b>EQIP</b>	6,989	3,463,110	\$171.9M
Farm and Ranchland Protection Program – <b>FRPP</b>	69	40,954	\$20.3M
Conservation Security Program – <b>CSP</b>	297	650,021	\$16.1M
Wetland Reserve Program – <b>WRP</b>	57	11,172	\$13.0M
Grasslands Reserve Program – <b>GRP</b>	24	41,364	\$7.4M
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program – <b>WHIP</b>	243	85,131	\$3.8M
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7,679</b>	<b>4,291,752</b>	<b>\$232.5M</b>

<b>NRCS Farm Bill Programs 2002-2008 COLORADO Accomplishments by Natural Resource Concern</b>			
<b>NR Concern</b>	<b>Contracts Approved</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Total Funding</b>
Water Quality/Quantity	2,131	317,816	\$53.9M
Salinity	952	43,606	\$39.0M
Grazing Land	1,285	2.0M	\$27.7M
GSWC	620	168,301	\$21.0M
Soil Management	595	237,195	\$10.1M
Animal Waste Management	137	35,134	\$5.4M
Wildlife	219	109,980	\$3.0M
Forestry	172	15,272	\$2.6M
Drought	96	321,839	\$2.0M
Riparian	70	9,759	\$2.0M
Invasive Species	321	38,238	\$1.7M
Ute Mountain Ute	8	150,728	\$1.2M
Acequais	158	14,675	\$733,000
Water Quality/Quantity AIT	16	2,335	\$617,000
Agro Forestry	133	5,320	\$405,000
Southern Ute	16	10,486	\$386,000
CNMP	54	6,190	\$112,000
Crowley Cnty Re-vegetation	6	798	\$74,000
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6,989</b>	<b>3.5M</b>	<b>\$171.9M</b>

A discussion was held on conditions of watersheds, rapid watershed assessments, and core land treatment conservation practices including residue management value, and newer efforts concerning forestry issues.

Major changes, rulemaking –

- New farm bill highlights – information is in Federal Register and NRCS national website – [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov)
- Financial assistance conservation practice contracts are planned to be funded more frequently, when conservation planning is complete, and the producer is ready, willing and able to proceed, versus of once a year as in the past. The emphasis will also be on shorter term agreements.
- Key Farm Bill common program changes- include the legal ability to partner with 3<sup>rd</sup> parties and accept and manage dedicated conservation project financial contributions.

- Technical Service Provider program authorities expanded beyond EQIP.

Discussed new conservation initiatives. Two new programs in new Farm Bill: Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) which replaces EQIP-Ground and Surface Water Conservation Program (GSWC).  
Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI )

10 Watershed Based Conservation Priority Public Input sessions were held within the last few weeks. During the sessions presentations and discussions were held covering;

- Identified Natural Resource Priorities
  - Resource concerns identified include:
    - Water Quality & Quantity
    - Forest Health
    - Invasive Species
    - Grazing lands
    - Expiring CRP contract related habitat and erosion resource issues
    - Resource concerns exacerbated by increasing small acreage landholdings amongst large working ag lands operations.
  - Causes of the concerns
  - Strategies to address concerns
  - Barriers to address concerns
- Suggestions to improve NRCS Programs

2008 Farm Bill Land Treatment Programs EQIP, WHIP – Dollie Gonzales  
Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008

- EQIP offers financial and technical assistance to agriculture and forestry producers to promote agricultural production, forest management, and environmental quality as compatible goals.
- 2008 Farm Bill authorities expanded to include energy conservation benefits associated with conservation practices. Specific section on assistance with conservation practices for specialty crops and organic agriculture.
- New beginning and socially disadvantaged farmer and ranchers Program opportunities are now offered.

Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) – Focus on water quality and quantity through partnership agreements or individual contracts with producers. Request for proposals will be solicited pending rulemaking.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) – Emphasis on efficient and effect transfer of innovative technologies and approaches.–National and State Grants are available. Program reviewed. Eligibility is flexible, as long as EQIP eligible resource concerns and producers benefit.

Discussion held on recent levels of CIG grant funding. Grant writing workshops may be held by CSSCB if there is enough interest.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) – Reauthorized. **WHIP** is a voluntary program for people who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat on private land. WHIP is limited to private agricultural land, non-industrial private forestland, and tribal lands. There is a \$50,000 limit per contract per year. Focus is on NRCS/State Technical Committee identified species of concern and priority habitat.

- FY2009 – Request for Proposals (RFP) discussed.
  - High Priority species
  - Priority Habitat
  - Partners included
  - November 3, 2009 deadline

Invasive species are addressed through EQIP RFP and partner funding mechanisms, not included in WHIP.

Payment schedule update

The Payment Schedule is the NRCS vehicle for documenting and establishing conservation practice payments for the EQIP, WHIP and CSP programs.

Use of templates that are program neutral will make conservation easier. Geographic payment rates will be used. Flat rate payments will be used for all practices.

The payment schedule process is intended to:

- Improve accountability
- Simplify conservation program development, contracting and contract administration
- Free-up conservationist for planning and technical consultation
- Improve cost information for all NRCS services

Discussion on expiring CRP contract lands held.

What % of expiring CRP contract land is getting cultivated in 2009? CRP planning and infrastructure will be difficult.

EQIP Invasive Species RFP Funding Summary.

- Nine 2008 proposals funded; \$1.8 million project applications received.
- 2009 RFP anticipated to ~~will~~ be released late in October or early November. Will be extended to January or February.
- New plant invasive species added in 2009 based on recommendations of Colorado Department of Agriculture. African Rue added to List A. Russian knapweed, Russian olive and Sulfur cinquefoil also added to List B.
- Encouraging watershed projects.
- County/state weed plan coordination.
- Encouraging Contribution agreements.
- Technical Service Provider assistance eligible and available, but underutilized.

Conservation Security Program is now Conservation Stewardship Program. This program rewards ongoing conservation stewardship. Available in every watershed for every year. Contracts will be 5 years and producers can re-enroll.

2008 Farm Bill Easement Programs –

Farmland Protection Program (FPP/FRPP). Reauthorized and expanded. Working lands program. Matching funds to help State, tribal, or local governments and NGOs purchase easements to keep productive farm and ranch lands in agricultural uses. Federal interest changed. Increase in funding.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) – Reauthorized. NRCS holds the easement. A “land retirement/habitat restoration” program. Also invest in site restoration. Changes include landownership cannot be changed in the previous 7 years with a few exceptions. Extinguishes agricultural uses and development rights. Raises maximum enrollment by 766,200 acres. Enrollment is limited to private or Tribal lands.

- Enrollment Options
  - Permanent easements
  - 30-year easements
  - Restoration cost share agreements
  - 30-year contract option for Tribes.

Funding and payment limitations discussed. A pilot program will be utilized this year. Landowner retains grazing rights.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) – Reauthorized and expanded. Working lands program. NRCS holds the easement. Acres expanded to additional 1,220,000 acres in the period of FY 2009-2012, expands eligible land to include tribal land, priority for enrollment to certain expiring CRP acres. Easement compensation method changed.

- Enrollment Options
  - Permanent Easements
  - 10-, 15-, 20-Year Agreements
  - 30-year agreements for Indian tribes

HFRP – New to Colorado. Working forest land program that benefits at risk wildlife species. NRCS holds the easement.

- Enrollment Options
  - Easements of not more than 99 years
  - 30-year easements
  - 30-year contracts for Indian tribes

Discussion held on easement programs.

How is the easement held? It is different for every program.

Are all easements monitored annually? Yes, we don't do direct monitoring of FRPP.

Does the easement stay with the land? Yes

Conservation Priority Areas & FSA Programs – **Terri Skadeland** for Kimberly Werstein

35% of cropland acres are CPAs. 33% is the limit. We are over our limit.

Tim Davis spoke about CPAs being looked at for consideration to be re-designated to include: An expansion of the Republican River CREP to include Washington and Lincoln Counties and include the proposed Rio Grande CREP which will encompass Rio Grande, Alamosa & Saguache Counties. He presented General CPA and continuous CPA with highlights on CREP including present percentage level and what led to this and future proposals. He also proposed ways to address percentage issue.

Discussion on designating CPAs. Reggie Wycoff clarified several points on redesignation of CPAs. Comments on input needed to accomplish cropland acres within the % limits. The CPAs must be re-designated and we must decide how to accomplish that with DC guidance. Need input from meeting today. Weigh acres in each county and effect of dollars. Comment: Affects whole community, not just producers.

2008 Farm Bill Partnership Opportunities

Agricultural Water Enhancement Program – **Jason Peel**

- Projects may address water quality or quantity issues.
- This is a 2008 Farm Bill replacement for the EQIP GSWC program.
- Program includes water conservation restoration or enhancement, and water quality and quantity improvements, irrigation system improvement, irrigation efficiency enhancement, drought mitigation, and other related activities.
- Application process may be submitted by a producer or by an entity on behalf of a producer.
- Applications will be selected on a competitive basis.

Discussion was held. Is application criteria dictated at the national level? Yes, but Chief or STC can grant waivers. Comment: Water right issues should be included in the application. Does this include dryland conversion? Yes. Is the funding similar to GSWC? Yes

Details will be forthcoming pending the 2008 Farm Bill rulemaking and public comment process.

2008 Farm Bill Partnership Opportunities

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative – **Allen Green**

Cooperative conservation partnerships with eligible partners to provide assistance to producers to enhance conservation outcomes on agricultural and nonindustrial private land operations.

Key points

- Local, state, multi-state, or regional partnerships.
- Targeted to helping producers meet regulatory requirements related to production agriculture and nonindustrial private forest land.

- Conservation practices that affect multiple agricultural or nonindustrial private forest operations emphasized.
- Promote the development and demonstration of innovative conservation practices and delivery methods.

Initiative covered program authorities include EQIP, WHIP, and CSP. Resources delivered under applicable program rules. Secretary may adjust the elements of applicable programs.

Eligible programs open to everyone except the federal agencies government.

Competitive application process. Multi-year agreements NTE 5 years.

#### CCPI Proposal Content

- Area covered by the agreement
- Conservation priorities & objectives
- Expected level of participation by eligible producers
- Collaborating roles, responsibilities, and capabilities
- Resources requested and non-Federal resources that will be leveraged by the Federal contribution
- Monitoring, evaluating, and progress reporting plan
- Such other information that may be required by the Secretary

#### Priorities

- Areas with a high percentage of producers involved and working agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land
- Significant financial and technical resources leverage
- Coordination with other local, State, or Federal efforts
- Delivery of high percentages of applied conservation
- Water quality, water conservation, or state, regional, or national conservation initiatives
- Innovation in conservation methods and delivery
- Other factors, as determined by the Secretary.

#### Funding

- 6% of applicable program funds and acres, EQIP, WHIP, CSP.
- 90% at the direction of the STC with the advice of State technical committees
- 10% based on a national competitive process
- Unused funding may be used to carry-out other authorized program activities.

Overhead or administrative costs of partners not covered.

#### Open Discussion:

- What can funds actually be used for? Funds used to concentrate program funds into a location.
- Colorado Partnership Priorities?
- Comment: Rocky Mountain National Park air quality – 40% of problems in the park attributed to agricultural sources.

- New science is available in understanding land sciences.
- Tim asked State Technical Committee members for forest health project priorities.
- Comment: Areas with Community Wildfire Protection plans.
- Short Grass Prairie Partnership brainstorming session came up with four potential CCPI issues; Republican River, addressing the threat relative to CRP ground, Tamarisk on the lower Arkansas, and lesser prairie chicken.
- Do we still have to live within the EQIP eligibility requirements? Yes, program authorities must be followed, however legislation references outcome based conservation to foster innovation.
- Would these be multi-year projects? Up to a five year project.
- What is the timeframe? The intent is for the program to be available in 2009.
- Species issues came up in the public output sessions.
- Where does payment schedule information come from? Gene and Dollie are using cost basis using information from CSU Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics conservation practice cost data and FY2008 NRCS conservation practice implementation cost information.
- How can conservation district be involved in a producer contract or compliance Appeal process?
- Legal and Program matters of conservation compliance were discussed.
- Comment: New NRCS partner programs don't allow for much if any administrative overhead, which eliminates some agency's participation
- . Questions were asked on the appeal process to payment rates. What are the steps of the appeal?
- Tim discussed methods of developing payment schedules, payment rates and the NRCS movement away from cost sharing to fund private lands conservation practices

Allen presented three areas of Colorado NRCS concern to think about for future State Technical Committee input.

- 1) Water, conservation measures. More efficient water use. How we approach impacts of water conservation benefitting resource, producers, and supporting interstate compact principles.
- 2) Forestry, non-industrial private forest lands.
- 3) Invasive species management, aquatic or plant or other.

#### Announcements

- Another State Technical meeting planned for will be held in December or when Farm Bill rules are published. The meeting will be moved around the state in future years.
- The 64th CACD Annual Meeting will be held Nov. 17-20 in Estes Park at the Rocky Mountain Conference Center.
- Nonpoint source program open for new projects for 2009.
  - Website: [www.npscolorado.com](http://www.npscolorado.com)



- Playa lakes joint venture is accepting applications until 11/14/08
  - Website: [www.pljv.org](http://www.pljv.org)

Allen Green adjourned meeting.